DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 556 PS 011 919

AUTHOR Baenen, Nancy R.; And Others
TITLE A Research Summary: The Effects of Grade Retention on Elementary Students.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Policy; Educational Research; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Grade Repetition; *Literature Reviews; School Holding Power; *Student Promotion

ABSTRACT

This research summary presents findings and restates policy conclusions as to whether grade retention or promotion is more beneficial for students with serious academic problems. It is claimed that research to date does not provide a conclusive answer to this issue, that serious methodological problems prohibit all but tentative conclusions, and that more quality research on the topic is needed. (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED196556

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

A Research Summary: The Effects of Grade Retention on Elementary Students

November, 1980

Nancy R. Baenen, Evaluator

Elaine Jackson, Evaluation Assistant

Lydia Morales, Secretary

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Freda M. Holley
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Approved:

Freda Holley

Freda M. Holley, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Evaluation

Publication Number 80.44

PS011919

Summary [1]

The research completed thus far is not conclusive about whether it is better to promote or retain students who are achieving below expectations. There seem to be more studies at present which support the view that grade retention is not more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic problems. Many studies have found that some students benefit, some stay the same, and some suffer from being retained compared to those who are promoted. Most of the research available, however, has serious methodological problems that make any conclusions drawn tentative at best.

Research that supports promoting low-achieving students has found that students who are retained do no better in terms of achievement than those who are promoted, and sometimes do worse. Some data also suggest that retaining students may be harmful to their self-concepts and attitudes towards school; students may feel isolated from age-mates and friends, feel like failures, be criticized by family members, and start to resent school. One study found that fear of retention did not serve to motivate students towards better performance compared to a social promotion policy. Finally, another study found that retention actually did not appear to result in a narrower range of ability levels in the classroom.

Other research has found results which support retention policies. Achievement gains have been found for students who are retained. The argument has also been made that students avoid increasing feelings of frustration caused by being passed from year to year without an understanding of the material. In terms of self-concept, some studies have found that students' self-concepts improve after being retained; the students feel less frustrated, and have more potential for success. Many teachers feel the range of ability levels which they have to deal with is more manageable when the lowest achievers are retained. One district which enforces strict policies regarding when a student is promoted and retained reports achievement gains by retained students, declining retention rates, and satisfaction on the part of students, teachers, parents, and the community as a whole.

[1] In an effort to supply a response to the question of the effects of retention on primary and intermediate students within a reasonable period of time, we concentrated on material from literature reviews and a computerized search of ERIC documents and journal articles. While not exhaustive, we do believe the results are representative of the work done to date.

Research Findings

Jackson completed an extensive review on the effects of grade retention in 1975. He found three types of studies done on this topic since 1911.

The first type involves comparing the achievement and social adjustment of students retained under normal school policies with those promoted under normal policies. Attempts are made to match the students by age, grade level, sex, grades, IQ and achievement test scores, and/or socio-economic status. The primary problem with these studies is that they are biased towards showing benefits from grade promotion, since the fact that some of the students were retained and some promoted under normal policies indicates that the severity of the problems was probably greater for those retained. Jackson reviewed 204 analyses, and found 136 supporting promoted students in terms of adjustment and achievement, and 68 favoring the retained pupils.

The second design type compares the condition of retained students before and after retention. The design bias here favors grade retention, since no comparison group is used, and there is no control for improvement due to any factors other than retention. Jackson (1975) found that achievement analyses indicated no losses and 73 gains in achievement by students after retention. In terms of social adjustment, he found three losses, two cases of no gain or loss, and 36 cases of improvements in social adjustment after retention. Thus, these studies suggest retention generally improves students' social adjustment and achievement.

The third type of design involves a comparison of students with difficulties in school who were randomly promoted or retained. This is the only unbiased design. Unfortunately, all three studies of this type reviewed by Jackson (1975) were conducted at least 30 years ago, so their applicability to today's schools is questionable. More studies of this type are definitely needed.

All three studies involved primary and intermediate students, and looked at achievement gains over a one semester or six months period. Analyses revealed 18 differences in achievement favoring promoted students, and 22 differences favoring retained pupils. Obviously, these results do not provide strong support for either course of action (see Cook, 1941; Farley, 1936; and Klene and Branson, 1929). Farley (1936) did report different results by grade level. He found no differences in achievement between fourth and fifth graders who were retained or promoted. However, he did find significantly greater gains in reading for second and third graders who were promoted rather than retained (there were no significant differences in mathematics).

Others have also reviewed the literature and report conflicting conclusions (see Best of ERIC, 1979). Koons (1977) cites research which shows regularly promoted low-achievers doing better than similarly troubled students who are retained. He states that although some students may benefit from retention, for every one that does there are two or more who do not -- some may actually regress after non-promotion.

Reiter (1973) concludes from research findings that grade retention is futile; it does not ensure higher achievement or better emotional adjustment

than social promotion. He also believes the research suggests that retention can damage student motivation, and that the policy does not help schools maintain high standards of achievement. However, he does caution that an automatic promotion policy -- the opposite extreme -- can also cause serious problems and fail to resolve the problems of poor achievement and adjustment.

Walker (1973) states that evidence fails to support a policy of forced non-promotion. Students generally do not learn more when repeating a grade and often learn less, and retained students never appear to catch up throughout their schooling. He also reports that poor self-concept may be linked with low achievement, and that this may be aggravated by retention. Non-promotion also may foster negative attitudes towards school.

Bocks (1977) reports that the overwhelming majority of studies reveal that the practice of non-promotion is of no benefit to the child, and may actually be harmful. He cites research at both the primary and intermediate levels which found that:

- Some students did better work after retention (about 20-35%), some stayed about the same, and some actually performed worse. Students who were retained performed at about the same level as those who were promoted on the average. Non-promotion did not ensure mastery of elementary school subject matter.

- In terms of social outcomes, regularly promoted students showed significantly higher scores on scales of personal and social adjustment. On the average, the retained student was likely to choose companions in grades ahead and would like to join them there. Family members sometimes criticized the child for his/her "failure". Discrimination against overage children varied by grade level, and was more severe in grades 4, 5, and 6 (see Morrison and Perry, 1956).

- Non-promotion does not appear to reduce the range of specific abilities with which upper-grade elementary teachers have to cope.

- Second and fifth grade students who were told at the beginning of the semester that all of them would be promoted to the following grade performed as well on a comprehensive achievement test as those who were reminded throughout the semester that they must do good work or suffer non-promotion (see Otto and Melby, 1975).

Hess (1978) reports that studies of the effects of retention on academic achievement are generally inconclusive. Remedial instruction within the grade level may be more valuable than older methods of retention.

The Philadelphia Public Schools (1965) state that grade repetition not only fails to help most students academically, but often causes additional problems. Major problems are that the student is older and larger than his/her classmates, and his/her learning rate is generally below average. The report points to several studies showing a relationship between school retardation and delinquency.

Individual studies not covered in these reviews but worthy of not include those of Finlayson (1975) and Owen and Ranick (1977). Both studies support grade retention.

Finlayson (1975) compared the self-concepts of promoted, non-promoted, and borderline-promoted first graders during the 1973-74 school year. He found that the self-concepts of non-promoted students continued to increase while the self-concepts of the other groups tended to decrease slightly on a self-concept measure. Self-concept scores of the three groups did not differ significantly at the beginning and end of the study, however. Both teachers and parents saw their non-promoted children's self-concepts as positive and as remaining stable or becoming more positive after non-promotion; they did not view retention as harmful.

Owen and Ranick (1977) report on a school district program in which social promotion is not allowed. Students are not promoted without mastering the skills of their grade level, and standardized test scores play an important part in the evaluation. The schools try to bring each student up to prescribed standards, diagnose individual student's strengths and weaknesses, provide intensive instruction to meet the needs of slower students, and create an atmosphere of success. Retained students are not placed with newly promoted students, but with others of their age. Partial promotions are also possible. The authors report positive results; measured IQ's and achievement test scores have risen, dropout and retention rates have fallen, and students, teachers and the community are satisfied.

Policy Conclusions from Research

Jackson (1975) draws perhaps the best conclusion from all of these studies. He believes that more quality research on the topic is needed before any conclusions are drawn. He does go on to say that results presently available suggest that both grade retention and promotion can have benefits for students; grade promotion, however, seems to have more. Realistically, support can be found for both types of policies.

Several authors do go on to recommend policies for dealing with low-achievers. Some recommend promoting all students; others recommend strict promotion standards tied to skill mastery and standardized test scores. Reiter (1973) suggests that either extreme can be harmful to students. The best most districts can probably do is settle for a policy favoring social promotion but permitting occasional purposeful retention in the primary grades. Reiter believes the key question is actually not whether academically deficient students should be retained but how the most favorable learning situation can be provided for the pupil. He states, "More important than a set policy and administrative convenience are the student's individual needs and the specific context or atmosphere in which promotional decisions are applied". Individualized instruction and nongraded programs were mentioned by several authors as the ideal solutions. Unfortunately, nongraded program evaluations have often been poorly designed and inconclusive, and at least some individualized approaches have not been shown to be effective (Austin Independent School District, 1974, 1975; Watkins and Holley, 1977). Hess (1973) suggests remedial programs within grade levels may be more valuable than older forms of retention. Creative solutions to the real issue of meeting the learning needs of these students must still be sought.

Finally, it must be recognized that retention policies are tied to swing in educational policies. Before 1960 most districts normally retained students who could not master desired course content. The 1960's and early 70's brought a trend toward social promotion. The latest swing of the pen-

dulum has been back towards tighter policies, teaching the basics, and competency-based education (see Updating School Board Policies, 1977). It is hard to say how long this trend will last. Some minimum competency efforts are already being criticized. It is quite possible that some students would simply benefit more from retention, and some from promotion.

References

Austin Independent School District. Individually Guided Education Final Report. Austin, Tx: Office of Research and Evaluation, 1975. (ERIC Document No. ED 154 493)

Austin Independent School District. Individually Guided Education (IGE) Summary Evaluation Report. Austin, Tx.: Office of Research and Evaluation, 1974.

Bocks, W. M. Non-promotion: A Year to Grow? Educational Leadership, February 1977, 34(5), 379-383.

Cook, W. W. Grouping and Promotion in the Elementary School (College of Education Series on Individualization of Instruction, No. 2). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1941.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. Student Retention Vs. Social Promotion. The Best of ERIC, No. 43. Eugene: University of Oregon, 1979. (ERIC Document No. ED 011 240)

Farley, E. S. Regarding repeaters - Sad effects of failure upon the child. Nation's Schools, 1936, 18(4), 37-39.

Finlayson, H. J. Non-promotion and self-concept development. Phi Delta Kappan, November 1977, 59(3), 205-206.

Hess, Fritz, et.al. Promotion Versus Non-Promotion: A Policy Review. New York, 1978.

Jackson, G. B. The research evidence on the effects of grade retention. Review of Educational Research, Fall 1975, 25(4).

Klene, V., and Branson, E. (Unknown title.) The Elementary School Journal, 1929, 29, 564-566.

Koons, C. L. Non-promotion: A dead-end road. Phi Delta Kappan, May 1977, 58(9), 701-702.

Morrison, Ida E., and Perry, Ida F. Acceptance of overage children by their classmates. Elementary School Journal 56, January 1956, 217-220.

Otto, H. J., and Melby, E. O. Attempt to evaluate the threat of failure a factor in achievement. Elementary School Journal 25, 1935, 588-596.

Owen, S. A., and Ranick, D. L. The Greensville program: A commonsense approach to basics. Phi Delta Kappan, March 1977, 53(7), 531-533, 539.

Reiger, R. G. The Promotion/Retention Dilemna: What Research Tells Us. Report No. 7416. Philadelphia: Office of Research and Evaluation, Philadelphia School District, 1973. (ERIC Document No. ED 099 417)

Walker, W. E. The slow-progress student in graded and nongraded programs. Peabody Journal of Education, April 1973, 50(3), 191-210.

Watkins, J., and Holley, F. Evaluation of the Individually Guided Education (IGE) Program: Lessons Learned. Austin, Tx.: Office of Research and Evaluation, Austin Independent School District, 1977. (ORE Pub. No. 76.40)

When students can't make the grade, do your schools pass them anyway? Updating School Board Policies, April 1977, 8(4), 1-2, 4-5.